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ABSTRACT

Responding to John Bormuth's econometric argument for a more balanced program of support for reading and writing instruction, this paper considers some of the reasons that literacy policy has not been formulated in the economically most rational manner. These reasons include the fact that reading instruction has become politicized, the availability of better measurement techniques for reading than for writing skills, and the friction between professional associations with overlapping interests. (AA)

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RESPONSE TO PROF. BORMUTH'S PAPER

Rexford Brown

Thank you. One thing that Dr. Bormuth's paper reminded me of is the line in a letter from Flaubert to Turgenyev which reads, "I am sorry this is such a long letter; if I had had more time, I would have written a shorter one." It's absolutely so, I have learned as a managing editor, that it takes more time and more money to write shorter and more comprehensible material, as Dr. Bormuth contends.

Like Dr. Venezky, I have a favorite New Yorker cartoon too, and it occurs to me that it would serve as a useful way of introducing what I am going to do. It appeared a couple of years ago, and it showed this disheveled man crossing the street in New York and stubbing his toe on the curb. As he recovers, he raises his fist and he shouts, "Damn you, Lindsay." I think that in order for me to make some of the points I want to make today, I'm going to have to sound somewhat like that person. Both papers were so reasonable that I am forced to respond to them in some unreasonable, irrational, perverse, or even insane way, in order to strike a balance. And, so I will. What I want to do is say some things that will reflect a deliberate exaggeration of the situation, because one of the things I learned while teaching literature is that very often you have to exaggerate something in order to see it. It's there, it's potent, it's at work, it's important. But sometimes you have to blow it all out of proportion in order to call people's attention to it. I will be doing a little bit of that with respect to the reading movement and what I consider to be an over-emphasis on reading over the last 10 to 15 years. And I will be doing it in support of Dr. Bormuth's contention that resources must be balanced more evenly in language arts programs.

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Literacy is an extremely complicated matter. Both speakers said as much; I feel obligated to say as much myself. When we're instructing children, the shift from an oral orientation to print is not just a mechanical matter to the child, or to the person from an oral culture. The shift that we demand when we insist on literacy is a shift to a very different world view. When, for instance, we take papers away from children, most of them don't understand why. It's not at all clear to them that the pictures and the writing that they've written on the pictures are going to be taken far away from them, at such distance that they won't be able to explain to you what it is that they are trying to communicate. They are not at all sure that they approve of the adult desire to fix things, to write things down, to linearize, to take feelings and ideas, put them on a piece of paper as if locking them in a safe, somehow make them concrete. There is, of course, a giving of great power to children when we given them literacy. But, we should not expect them to automatically accept such a strange world view, so difficult to acquire, so very complex, so demanding that it requires profound emotional shifts in their perspective on life. If education in literacy is not done with sensitivity to the enormity of the demand and to the emotions involved, it can be botched. Then, it can be counter-productive. Literacy policy, then, is not just a matter of either school or economic or political policies. It is not just instructional gimmicks and games and programs and profits. It is a highly personal and highly emotional matter, tied to arbitrary cultural demands which are not necessarily linked to human needs. It is value laden, it's very often arbitrarily tied to intelligence and deeply affects the self-images and self-respect of learners. Great care should be taken in formulating a literacy policy for this reason as well as for the reasons that the previous speakers have so well given us.

I want to address the bulk of my response particularly to Professor Bormuth's paper. I support his conclusion wholeheartedly. But, I arrived at that conclusion from an entirely different point of view. Rather than going back over his point of view, I want to add to it another way of looking at the matter in the hope that the more ways we have of arriving at the conclusion, the more powerful the conclusion might be in persuading people away from a policy that allocates too many resources to only one aspect of the language arts program in America.

There are two assumptions in Professor Bormuth's paper that are very well taken: the first is that reading has, in fact, received more attention and more resources than writing over the last decade and a half or two decades. That is supportable. It has certainly received a good deal more attention than writing has, whether we are talking about economic attention, public attention, or educational attention. The second point raised by Professor Bormuth is that literacy policy is not formulated in a rational manner. I think that is easy to support as well. I want to ask, today, why are those things so? My thoughts on this matter started a couple of years ago, when I was asked to interpret the results of a state-wide assessment of reading and writing skills. While talking to the state Right-to-Read Coordinator, I discovered she was very disturbed by my background. She said that although it was true I had taught English for seven years and I had a doctorate in literature, she wondered if I knew anything about reading! And I began to wonder, too! Maybe I don't know anything about reading I told myself, and maybe I should not take this job. When I was on the airplane going back home, however, I reconsidered. If I don't know anything about reading, I thought, there is something wrong. To be sure, there are some esoteric matters and some research matters, and some pedagogical matters about reading of which I am ignorant; but I know

a heck of a lot about reading. So, I went on to do it. But that is when I began to ask myself, why is there a Right to Read? Why is there an International Reading Association? Why were there reading specialists and reading centers in my state but no "Right to Write" program? There was no International Writing Association, there were no writing labs and writing specialists and there were no writing centers in my state.

Some of the answers to my questions are quite obvious. Reading had become politicized. Someone had said, in effect: "Learn to read, so when you are in the voting booth you know my name." There is another side to it too -- "Look, I'd like you to vote for me, but please, no letters, I'm busy." So why learn to write? The politization of reading was a very natural sort of thing, given the civil rights climate in the early 60's. It had an empty slot waiting in the educational community -- the slot that had once been filled by a couple of generations of teachers who were instrumental in naturalizing foreigners -- in Helping Those People. Furthermore, there was a lot of guilt in place, ready to be tapped, and there was money -- federal money. Reading teachers, elementary teachers, English teachers, like everyone else, have felt for some time a need for greater appreciation and higher status; it became apparent that the way to get those things was to change one's major and go into the area of reading.

There were some less obvious reasons, however, for the polarization of things toward reading. One was that when the political aspects of reading became prominent, there were in place, as a consequence of the great postwar testing boom, a number of reading tests. Thus, if you were a Washington bureaucrat about to spend federal dollars in some area of language arts and you wanted accountability for your money, you were likely to send your money to an area where there was test feedback. And there was at that time very little

professional argument about what constitutes quality reading, like there would be if you decided you wanted a writing program. Reading appeared easier to teach than writing and lent itself far more readily to the production of textbooks and graduated programs of instruction.

Reading is complex; politics are not sophisticated. Politically motivated movements, even in education, however well-intentioned they are, have a way of concentrating on the practical, the pragmatic, and the dramatic. One of the things that worries me about intense public and political interest in reading, intense interest in literacy or even, should it happen, intense interest in writing is that the interest is always in low level achievement and not in achievement across the board, not in the acquisition of sophisticated skills, attitudes and perspectives on experience.

So, in spite of the fondest hopes of many people in the reading movement, the focus was primarily on the most dramatic of the illiterate and in-need, and the emphasis was on bringing them up to very rudimentary reading levels. The pressure to produce results was great even though, as a number of people have noted, no fully accepted or adequate theory of language acquisition and development existed. There were few adequate psychological frames within which such a movement could work. There was a simplistic behavioristic notion of language and verbal behavior, there were only crude test instruments and there was no notion of how the new reading programs would mesh with existing writing, literature and language programs in which every child would have to spend 7 or 8 years. Although many gains were made in our knowledge during this period, and according to National Assessment data, some improvement was registered in functional literacy, there were inevitable, unintended affects that may have offset the gains. To begin with, there was this strange marriage of instruction and tests, so that after a while, tables of contents in reading books were

identical to the units of the reading tests themselves. Reading was defined early on as that which could be tested with multiple choice tests, and so it was taught that way -- with no evidence that the content of the subject "Reading" was limited to the domains staked-out in the tests, or that the activity of test-taking was a good kind of reading to subject students to. This leaves some queries. Did this marriage of reading and test programs lead to the atomization of the reading process -- the artificial breaking of it into convenient, but arbitrary, units? Did children learn that there's one right meaning per paragraph? There's one right pronunciation of Rochester? There's one definition per word? Did they learn that meaning resided only in the text and not in themselves? That reading was a hunt for the right answer to questions that they themselves would never have asked? Did some learn through all of this testing that reading is an exercise in being wrong? Was there, in short, for a number of reasons, a trivialization of the subject and an over-simplified and understimulating pedagogy?

If you think, as I do, that this might have happened, then you might probably think, too, that instruction in writing would have counteracted some of those trends. Why did writing receive so little emphasis in the primary grades? Why was it not taught? It's harder to teach, of course, and it involves motor skills that children do not develop until later on. It's more expensive to teach, too. And there is not much professional agreement about what it is and how it can best be taught. Also, politicians want votes, not letters; I say this playfully, but with a certain amount of seriousness. Remember that there is a difference between reading and writing in this respect -- the training of students in writing is the training of them in human agency, in acting. Mina Shaughnessy noted the other day that there was someone at the conference who was teaching at a military academy. He was teaching the cadets to read

and the officers to write. Was there, during the sixties, a similar attitude about the relative social importance of reading and writing, an unconscious preference for citizens who can receive information over those who would send information?

If a variety of political, social and economic factors combined with a burgeoning test industry to overemphasize reading and overconcentrate upon low-level, easily testable, aspects of reading, then we might predict some educational consequences. We might predict, for instance, a decline in higher level reading skills; and, in fact, National Assessment data do show that between 1970 and 1975, there was a decline in inferential skills. It is true that when you mush together the various areas of the Reading Assessment -- study skills, inferential skills, and literal reading skills -- you do not see much change at our three age levels. But if you look only at the results for inferential reading, you do see a decline in that capacity. Carried to an extreme, it might suggest one of the things that we're headed for is a nation in which everyone can read stop signs, but no one can read much else. We might also expect to see a ripple effect in other language skills. Without any research evidence, with only hunches, let me ask: would a reading program that overstresses low-level skills explain the literalism that literature teachers complain about in their students? Would it explain why the most common way students respond to a work of poetry or to an essay or to a story is to try to retell it? This literalistic approach is not so marked in other countries, as Alan Purves found in the International Assessment. In fact, there is a very marked difference between American and English honor students in English in this regard: many more English students seem to know that they have the right to evaluate a work of literature, to do much more with it than paraphrase it. Why do so few American students know that? Is it possible than an overemphasis on very pragmatic matters in early reading training is at work here? Is it possible that this also explains the appalling ignorance of American students about the roles and

functions of language and the importance of language for the individual and for the culture at large? Does this emphsis on minimal skills and on the utilitarian aspects of language set people up for propoganda, for double-speak and manipulation? Does it warm them up for television?

Time does not permit the asking of more such questions. I would only like to stress, in closing, the point that if our approach to language, for various political and economic reasons, is utilitarian, literalistic, or over-emphasizes the propositional, the informational aspects of language, then we cannot produce people literate in Dr. Bormuth's sense. We can produce only people who send and receive on a very narrow band of the language spectrum -- a nation of reading and writing CBer's who don't know about the AMs and FMs of language, let alone the radars that poets play with. This is one potential consequence, it seems to me, of a maldistribution of resources. If you add to it the kinds of professional friction that many of us are familiar with, the bickering, the turf defending, the redundancy of cost and effort between the IRA, the NRC, the CCCC, the NCTE and the vast numbers of departments of English and language arts, you get a feeling that this atomization, this overemphasis on some aspects of language use and not on others has been bad professionally and, consequently, bad for the students at large. So I would support Professor Bormuth's point of view very heartily: we should not allocate our resources in an inequitable manner; they should be balanced. And I support it on the grounds I have just sketched, in addition to those that he has advanced.

Thank you.